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## Women's Cooperatives in Turkey

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### Abstract

Women's cooperatives in Turkey are those cooperatives which mostly tend to do utilize manual labor and are established with a bottom-to-top movement. They have been developing rapidly since the 2000's. These are mostly established as enterprises, small handicrafts, agricultural development and consumption cooperatives. Their member numbers range from 7(seven) to 100 (a hundred), and a considerable amount of them are located in Istanbul, Izmit, and Kocaeli. The most significant aims of these cooperatives are teaching women how to earn money by participating in production, social aims such as education, fighting against poverty, creating employment, and revealing local values. Members of women's cooperatives ( 61% aged 36-55, 35% aged 20- 35) are quite dynamic people who have the potential to work, and they are organized around the same targets without considering educational differences (32,4% university graduates, 24,5% high school graduates, 37,3% primary school graduates). Most of the partners are married and housewives. Moreover, members of women's cooperatives feel more important in cooperatives than they do in their family lives. These cooperatives have some financial problems at the establishment stage and later, and they want to be organized at an upper organization level. Limited working areas of associations and financial difficulties of establishing foundations directed women to establish cooperatives. Furthermore, the facts that cooperatives are non-governmental organizations which create employment and do not pay taxes, they are seen as a means of local development and lead women to this type of organizations. Women gain the spirit of unity, solidarity, interdependence and self-confidence in the women's cooperatives.

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### 1. Introduction

The cooperative movement goes back to Mithat Pasha and Atatürk, and it takes an important part in numbers (There are around 90 000 cooperatives and 9 million members in Turkey, accounting for 10 % of the population.). Although cooperatives have reached an adequate level in terms of numbers, they have not secured a prominent place in the national economy yet.

Participation of women into economic life is one of the underlined subjects recently. Women's cooperatives emerge as an important subject in terms of cooperation and women both taking part in economic life.

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According to the census results of the State Institute of Statistics in 2000, while the proportion of literate men is 93,9%, the proportion of women is behind this with 80,6%. There are also regional differences in women's education. (Anonymous 1, 2009; Anonymous 2, 2009; Anonymous 3, 2009).

Another subject that we should take into consideration in terms of education is that the working areas in professions requiring education for women are very limited. While unemployment rate for men is 20,5% in cities, this number goes up to 27,4% for women.

In Turkey, 87,4% of women do not take place in employment. In the working sector, 3 women are employed for 100 men.

Especially in the recent years, the organization of women is one of the highlighted subjects in the world. The increase of poverty in the world day by day, and negative impacts of this over women and children increase the importance of this subject. In improving employment in the world, independent democratic cooperatives play an important role by enforcing the marketing power of economically weak groups and enhancing the unity of the society.

Cooperatives as a model of organization for women have been a very new, exciting, and active subject in Turkey in the 2000's. Women's cooperatives are located in different places from Nepal to Iran in the world. Especially in the countries which are not developed economically, they are important in women's economic development. There is a women's cooperative which produces milk in Nepal, and a women's cooperative which produces medical plants in India. In Nigeria, they produce baskets. In Iran, women's cooperatives are encouraged, and works are carried out in conventional areas such as weaving (FAO, 2003).

## 2. Method

The survey was carried out by means of counting the whole cooperatives in the recently founded and rapidly increasing women's cooperatives in Turkey. The main material of the survey involved face-to-face interviews with their managers and women members. During the survey with managers, open ended questions about the aim of the cooperatives and general information about their activities were asked. In the survey with the members, questions were more involved in determining the profiles of the members.

In the survey step of the research at the end of 2005, the total number of cooperatives was 36, and the survey was applied to 34 of them. Other 2 cooperatives were not active and could not be reached. The survey was completed by interviewing three partners and one manager in each cooperative (Aksoy et al, 1996).

As for the results of the survey in this research, possible relations between the inactivity/activity status and demographic profiles such as profession, age, level of education etc. were tried to be determined by chi-square analysis (Sincich, 1990); however no relation was found.

Referring to a previously conducted study (Gönen et al, 2004), this research involved women members' perceptions about themselves, their roles in cooperatives and in families as parents and individuals. The fact that whether women felt themselves more important in cooperatives or as a parent was determined by t-tests. With similar statistical comparisons, the question of where they felt more important (in the family or in the cooperative) was researched. Another research question was that if these women found themselves more successful as a parent or as a member in the cooperative.

## 3. Research results

### 3.1. Overall state of women's cooperatives in Turkey

If we look at the development of women's cooperatives in Turkey, it is seen that most of them were founded in the post 2000's. Cooperatives are located in various regions. There are 34 women's cooperatives founded by women. Four of them are home-centered and small arts and crafts cooperatives, 1 of them is related to consumption, 1 of them is on agricultural development and the rest of them are management cooperatives. However, the number

of these cooperatives today has increased up to 93 (Anonymous 4, 2009) (Anonymous 5, 2009). The number of members in these cooperatives varies between 7 and 100.

An important amount of these cooperatives are located in Istanbul, Izmit, and Kocaeli. After giving brief information about the targeted cooperatives, the survey results are presented in more detail below.

### *3.2. Aims of women's cooperatives*

Although the aims of the researched cooperatives are basically similar, it is possible to gather them in three types. The first type is founded by various institutions and primarily directed by those institutions. (One of these institutions is KEDV – The Foundation for Evaluating Women's Labor - that has gained more importance because of the efforts they put after the earthquakes in Istanbul and Kocaeli). KEDV, with other cooperatives, supported the pre-school education and activities of women of low economic status who wish to earn additional income. We can mention other cooperatives that are founded by municipalities or with the support of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs under the project of "Social Support in Rural Areas.). The second type of cooperatives is the ones that attach importance primarily to social purposes (such as Bursa Günyüzü Women's Cooperative). The rest of them are organized to do something locally.

Although the main aim of these cooperatives is inclusion of women to production for economic profit, there are some cooperatives that attach more importance to social purposes such as education and getting organized. This is a situation that goes very well with the spirit of cooperatives. Their most obvious aims are struggling against poverty and creating employment. In addition, there are cooperatives that aim at bringing light to local values, opening day nurseries and kindergartens, and operating in agro-tourism. To help women to stand on their own feet, to improve their quality of life, to stop the exploitation of women's labor, to make women participate in local government can also be counted as other aims of these cooperatives.

### *3.3. Activities of women's cooperatives*

Activities of women's cooperatives can be grouped under three headings. The first one involves setting up small workshops operating in such areas as food production, sewing, mat weaving etc. The second group involves organizing courses on such income generating activities as wood painting, doll making, and making ornamental objects. The third group of activities include home-made food production and selling, guesthouse operation, restaurant operation, women's tea shop operation, chewing gum packaging, second hand clothes selling, seedling production, all of which generally utilize women's labor. Apart from these groups, there are also such activities as organizing courses and seminars on birth control, health protection, reading and writing, cooperation, and entrepreneurship.

Women's cooperatives provide education and employment to young women through child keeping projects. They have run various projects in the fields of rural handicrafts, carpet making, local dish making, hostel operation, and nursery operation, seminar organizations for women, luncheon organizations, fair and exhibition participations, computer design, and life-long learning activities. Furthermore, they have organized such activities as visits to municipal administrations on 8 March 2005 World Women's Day, entertainments on Mother's Day, vaccination campaigns against measles, visits to lonely fathers on Fathers' Day, conservation of the environment, and supporting traditional Turkish art music.

In those women's cooperatives, which were established with the support of various foundations, the following activities are conducted: opening up of local nurseries for children, improving the work conditions of house-cleaning women, setting up women associations, providing social activities for girls, creating employment for and nurturing solidarity among women.

Other activities involve child's playing rooms, social education of women, local motherhood, saving funds for women, developing child-mother relations, economic and cultural activities aiming for improving women's self-confidence and representation in the society, and establishing study rooms and libraries for 7-15 years old children. Among the above activities, the two most prominent examples are: (a) the World Bank Projects of "Sending

Embroidery Badges from 1000 Anatolian Women to 1000 European Women; and (b) “1 Seed, 1000 Hopes” [Kapari (*Capparis spinosa*) production]. These projects are largely financed by “The Social Risk Mitigation Loans” and the funds from the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Solidarity.

### *3.4. Opinions on the performance of women's cooperatives and future plans*

All these cooperatives also have future plans. Managers of these cooperatives point out that the major bottlenecks are in the areas of marketing, finance, and legislation.

The financial problems of women's cooperatives start at the establishment stage. Because of the fact that women who need cooperatives are usually the poor ones, this becomes a major problem in the beginning. The second important obstacle is the difficulty of obtaining loans. These obstacles force women's cooperatives to seek support from local municipalities and state organs.

The majority of cooperative members have underlined the critical importance of the support coming from the bottom of the cooperative and opined that they wanted to diversify their field of activities. The cooperative members believe that they can overcome their problems with solidarity, unity, respect, and love. In order to overcome marketing problems, they visit stores and offer samples as promotional efforts. The members also draw attention to the lack of organization which created a common will for setting up a communication network.

The members believe in the benefits of working together. In obtaining self-financial independence, women members believe that they should be aware of their personal identities and organized actions. In doing so and by acting together, they are likely to increase their power. Women members want to have a cooperative union, but the present shortcoming is their insufficient education. They opine that the existence of volunteer women leaders is necessary to motivate and support as they aim to strengthen women's position in the society. Members of women's cooperatives want to be integrated with their environment and direct their works towards the existing demand areas. However, they need further contribution and more members in this. Women's cooperatives need active participation of members, volunteers, and local people. More women should be invited into the cooperatives, and contacts should be established within large firms. They also target discovering new product and market opportunities together with a more professional work based on carefully prepared projects. The cooperative members want to contribute women's learning on how to work and act together. They further aim to revive some forgotten cultural values in the society.

### *3.5. Managers' opinions on the differences between their cooperatives and other organizations*

Although the managers' opinions vary with the type of the cooperative they are affiliated, it is observed that they have correct information about the cooperative organization, its functions and differences from other organization types. The managers are aware of the facts that cooperatives are collectively founded by a group of people who share similar social and economic conditions; that cooperatives are democratic organizations with equal rights in voting; and that they involve an economic cooperation.

Managers know that cooperatives create employment and are exempt from some taxes. They also know that they are non-governmental organizations which serve as local development agencies. Other differences of cooperatives from companies are reported to be their non-profit nature and small capital needs. Their contribution to women's self-confidence and unity is also underlined.

The limited operation areas of associations and heavy establishment costs of foundations are reported to be the major motives for women in setting up cooperatives. The managers believe that cooperatives are ideal organizations for solving common problems and meeting needs in a collective manner. In short, they see cooperatives as organs of economic cooperation.

### *3.6. Managers' opinions on the cooperative principles*

According to the survey results, it is observed that managers are generally aware of such principles as free entry, distribution of returns, democratic control, and cooperative education. However, their knowledge is incomplete.

They are also quite knowledgeable on basic values of cooperatives such as spirit of solidarity, transparency, and women's economic unity. This finding has previously been underlined by prior studies (Mülayim, 2006; Özdemir, 2005) which can be taken as a good evidence for the fact that women's cooperation departs from the bottom and develops towards the top.

### *3.7. Reasons for cooperative membership by cooperative managers and members*

If the reasons for becoming cooperative members are examined, the most prominent ones are the motivation of acting together and the will of social and economic sharing. Other important reasons for membership are active participation in social development, the spirit of solidarity among women, the will of showing their labor, and obtaining self-economic independence. Furthermore, such reasons as taking reference of previously established cooperatives, self-development and helping others, and setting up nurseries for their children etc. are listed.

### *3.8. Profiles of the members of women's cooperatives*

According to the results of our survey among the members of women's cooperatives, it was seen that around 61 % of the members were between 36-55 years of age and 35 % were between 20-35. This finding shows us that the members of women's cooperatives constitute a dynamic and active part of the society.

If we look at their educational status, the proportions of university graduates (32,4 %) and high school diploma owners point out that educated people have an interest in women's cooperatives. The existence of primary school graduates (37,3 %) in women's cooperatives together with highly educated segments aiming at the same objectives highlights the fact that women do not have any difficulty in getting together.

When the profiles of the members are reviewed in terms of their occupations and marital status, it is observed that the majority of them (%54,9) are housewives. Although some of them are university graduates and have not previously been employed outside, they are employed by their cooperatives. Other occupational groups are teachers, retired women, engineers, and workers. The proportion of married members is 74,6 %.

### *3.9. Family profiles of women's cooperatives' members*

Around 38,5% of the members had a family size of 4 persons, 36,5 % had two children, and children's age varied between 6-18 (65 %). Of the spouses, 65 % were between 36-55 years of age, 58% with high school education and above, 38 % with primary school education.

Around 11 % of the spouses were unemployed, 78,4 of the families had children, and 60 % had their own house. The majority of them (70,6) lived in apartments and in the city centers (88,2%).

## **4. Conclusions**

As a new concept, women's cooperatives in Turkey are at their crawling stage but also reflect a rapid development trend. Earning economic benefits by way of participation in production, getting organized, education, fighting against poverty, and creating employment are the major objectives of women in these cooperatives. They largely tend to be engaged in those activities which will utilize their labor.

This research also aimed to describe the general characteristics of women's cooperatives, and it was found that the members were quite dynamic and able to work (61% between 36-55 years of age; 35 % between 20-35). Along with this, women were organized around the shared goals within their cooperatives without any difficulty despite the existing differences in their education levels (32,4 % university graduates, 24,5 % with high-school education; 37,3 with primary school education).

The majority of them were married housewives. With respect to their family profiles, around 11 % of the spouses were unemployed, 78,4 % of the families had children, and 60 % had a house. They generally lived in apartments



(70,6) which were located in city centers (88,2 %). The research revealed that the members of women's cooperatives perceived themselves as more important in their cooperatives than in their families.

Facing several financial difficulties in their establishment and operation stages, these cooperatives strived for vertical integration in order to operate more efficiently. To overcome financial shortcomings, external support from the government and the local authority seems to be of critical importance.

Social and economic sharing, its democratic nature, equality among members, the existence of economic cooperation are among the motivations of women who get together under the roof of women's cooperatives. Further motivations for women to set up cooperatives are the legal limitations on associations in terms of their activity fields and heavy financial burdens of setting up foundations. The cooperatives also have such advantages as creating employment, having tax exemptions, being major actors of local development, and having the status of non-governmental organizations. Within these cooperatives, women have unity, the spirit of solidarity, and self-confidence.

The critical point which requires specific attention here is that women's cooperatives should be set up with a bottom-to-top movement. Women have started this movement based on their real needs, and this is a desired situation particularly favored by cooperative people. If we look at some cooperative examples in Turkey, particularly in agriculture, they have survived under the guidance of the state organs for several years without the real commitment of their members.

In fact, these are bad examples. However, as is the case for women's cooperatives, there have been cooperatives which were set up with bottom-to-top movement and survived for many years despite their economic weaknesses and dispersed position. In order to avoid the same consequences, women's cooperatives should pay particular attention to conscious development and collaboration with each other.

Another important point discovered in this research is that women face difficulties in operating their cooperatives since they are largely unfamiliar with the business life and lack commercial expertise. Nevertheless, they are in a continuous mode of seeking solutions to get rid of the heavy burden of poverty and economic crises. Therefore, women should be offered education, credit, consultancy, and marketing support in order to include them into the national economy.

It is a visible fact that women's cooperatives have brought a new spark to the Turkish cooperative movement. To be nationally successful, however, women's cooperatives should seek ways of collaboration by leaving their presently dispersed and unorganized development.

This is among the key principles of cooperation. Otherwise, they will be destined to remain as small and inefficient organizations. They should utilize their local and traditional products and protect their local characteristics. They should further seek ways of national and international cooperation. Finally, women's cooperatives constitute a prominent economic model for women and an important step for the society's democratic progress.

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